

Analysis

Prajwal Revanna Case, Sexual Violence & Leaked Videos : Tackling the Continuing Arc of Abuse

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Former Member of Parliament Prajwal Revanna is in jail, accused of rape and sexual assault by multiple women, but thousands of videos of the alleged assaults are freely available. Technologist Rohini Lakshané explains how the free circulation of abusive content can be reduced.*

‘Pen drive case’, as some news outlets are calling it, is a reference to the almost 3,000 videos that surfaced in April on the internet showing the alleged sexual assault, rape and sexual abuse of several women by Prajwal Revanna, the erstwhile Member of Parliament from Hassan in Karnataka. The name is an identifier of the mode of distribution via which the videos were initially circulated before they appeared on the internet. 2,000 pen drives containing the videos were reportedly (<https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/india/prajwal-revanna-sexual-assault-videos-karnataka-mp-b2537017.html>) placed by unidentified entities in public places and public transport in Hassan.



Screengrab of rape accused Prajwal Revanna, arrested by an all-women police team on his return to Karnataka

In many of the videos the victim-survivors can be clearly seen and heard, neither their faces blurred nor voices masked. The videos are being virulently distributed on messaging apps (such as WhatsApp and Telegram), message boards and forums, social media platforms, pornographic websites, torrents, and cloud storage services for videos. (Note: Some websites, groups and channels where **image-based sexual abuse (IBSA)** content is posted have not been named here for ethical reasons, that is, in order to avoid publicising them.)

As has been widely reported and can be observed, users of these services and sites have been actively seeking and distributing this content by posting requests for the videos, often for a small fee. Messaging apps, forums, social media sites and websites that display non-consensual pornography are rife with persons trying to trace the identities of the women in the videos. Reports by The News Minute (see [here](https://www.thenewsminute.com/karnataka/silenced-by-fear-survivors-reveal-years-of-abuse-in-the-revanna-household), (<https://www.thenewsminute.com/karnataka/silenced-by-fear-survivors-reveal-years-of-abuse-in-the-revanna-household>) [here](https://www.thenewsminute.com/long-form/when-violence-is-) (<https://www.thenewsminute.com/long-form/when-violence-is->

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Arc of abuse

What has happened in this case is the exact arc of almost all IBSA content and its impact on victim-survivors. Commonly known by the misnomer “revenge porn”, IBSA refers to the capture, publishing and distribution of nude or sexually explicit images or videos without the consent of one or more persons in the frame. The term “revenge porn” to mean non-consensual nude or sexually explicit images and videos is misleading and harmful. (See, “[Revenge Porn”: 5 important reasons why we should not call it by that name \(https://genderit.org/es/node/5232\)](https://genderit.org/es/node/5232)”). Some media outlets have been using the terms ‘sex scandal’, ‘obscene videos’ or ‘intimate images’, all of which are incorrect and harmful terms in the context of videos of rape, sexual assault and abuse.

For nude, partially nude or sexually explicit images to be captured, published or distributed, consent needs to be established at four levels:

1. The sexual act or nudity or partial nudity is consensual.
2. The person (s) in the frame shoot their own images or videos, or consent to being photographed or videographed. They may choose to cover their faces and bodily marks that could be used to identify them (such as tattoos or birthmarks) or blur or crop them out.
3. The person(s) in the frame consensually send the images and videos to one or more recipients (say, an intimate partner, or clients on adult services such as OnlyFans). In this scenario, they may not consent to the images and videos being distributed to anyone other than the intended recipients.
4. The person(s) in the frame consent to the images and videos to be posted on the internet. Typically, these persons are exhibitionists or professional or amateur porn performers.

There are many contexts in which non-consensual intimate images can be recorded. Hidden cameras planted in hotel rooms, spas, fitting rooms of clothing stores, restrooms, shared accommodation etc. capture people in the moments when they expect privacy, and

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the videos later appear on the internet. Unethical hackers break into accounts searching for private images, using which they extort money from victims. Or, they send the images to someone who intends to abuse them.

These are a smattering of the numerous ways in which IBSA occurs at the hands of a range of perpetrators who come from a range of motivations. (For a detailed explanation of the topic, refer to the paper “Non-consensual intimate imagery: an Overview (<https://zenodo.org/records/10980145>)”, which elucidates on various aspects of the topic, including the types and motivations of perpetrators, the impact on victim-survivors, how morality and victim-blaming is often interwoven in responses, the difficulty of seeking recourse or a remedy, types of applicable legislation and its limitations and resources for take-down of images and coping with incidents).

Strong drivers

The Prajwal Revanna videos case starkly points to a pressing and hitherto overlooked need. The media, law enforcement agencies and civil society are unprepared to handle incidents of IBSA in a manner that swiftly and sensitively protects victim-survivors and reduces further trauma and rupture of their lives. When an incident of IBSA occurs or is threatened, coordinated and swift interventions are necessary to protect victim-survivors, for two major reasons:

The images stay in circulation perpetually

Once IBSA content is ~~released in offline or online circulation (<https://genderit.org/feminist-talk/peeping-tom-porn-and-privacy>)~~, it goes “viral”. It is extremely challenging to get it permanently removed from the internet and offline locations. Different entities repeatedly forward it and post it ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Non-consensual_pornography_in_India_\(2014\).pdf&page=13](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Non-consensual_pornography_in_India_(2014).pdf&page=13)) across different sites and services, which keeps it circulating in perpetuity. This process is called “**downstream distribution**”. A day’s or even a few hours’ time could make the difference between, say, 200 views and 2 million views on an image or a video. Hence, timely interventions are important.

IBSA content is a rampant and lucrative industry in India with well-established distribution mechanisms. There are several entities in its “supply chain”. IBSA content is monetised via various modes on pornographic websites, messaging applications (such as Telegram and WhatsApp), social networking sites, forums, video-hosting services, and offline networks. IBSA content is also used for extorting from the victim-survivors. These are strong drivers behind the circulation of IBSA content online and offline.

In cases where a public figure is involved, such as the Prajwal Revanna videos or the case of the Abhishek Manu Singhvi sex video from 2011, there may be political motivations behind circulating such content. The non-financial motives that drive the circulation of IBSA content include but are not limited to voyeurism, revenge for a real or perceived wrong, so-called vigilantism (say, exposing adultery, or someone’s identity as queer), intimidating and/ or controlling the victim-survivor, or taking pleasure in another’s pain.

The impact on victims is grave and life-changing

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A significant amount of academic research (e.g. Huber, A. (2023). ‘A shadow of me old self’: The impact of image-based sexual abuse in a digital society. *International Review of Victimology*, 29(2), 199-216. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02697580211063659> (<https://doi.org/10.1177/02697580211063659>)) and practitioner knowledge shows that the impacts on victim-survivors are continuous, grave and life-changing and on par with experiences of offline sexual abuse and violence. The ramifications include but are not limited to termination from employment (<https://www.etuc.org/en/pressrelease/stop-bosses-firing-revenge-porn-victims>), expulsion from school/college, social isolation, eviction from home, abandonment by family, partners or friends, shaming and humiliation. Many consider suicide. In the case of circulation of videos of rape or sexual assault, the original act being that of violence, it sets up a relentless cycle of retraumatisation and revictimisation. IBSA also puts victim-survivors at risk of further abuse, violence and harassment. Some victims of Prajwal Revanna are already experiencing this, according to the news reports cited above.

Prompt intervention

In light of the ramifications for victim-survivors, when an incident of IBSA occurs or is threatened, it is necessary to act quickly to provide psychological, technical and legal support to the victim-survivors. Some may require protection or safeguards in terms of physical or digital safety. Some require medical intervention because the incident affects their physical health (https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/deepfake-porn_in_5c1201cfe4b0508b213746bd). It is also crucial to remove the images or videos quickly and put curbs and deterrents on their further distribution.

In the case of the Prajwal Revanna videos, the Special Investigative Team (SIT) has set up a dedicated helpline (<https://www.thenewsminute.com/karnataka/silenced-by-fear-survivors-reveal-years-of-abuse-in-the-revanna-household>) for victims and issued a public warning (<https://www.thenewsminute.com/karnataka/prajwal-revanna-case-sit-warns-against-storing-sharing-sexual-abuse-videos>) of legal action against storing and circulating the videos. However, because of the nature of downstream distribution, there is no way to completely and permanently remove all the IBSA content online and offline. According to a news report (<https://starofmysore.com/sit-forms-three-sub-teams/>), the SIT formed a sub-team “to verify the authenticity of the videos, the IP [Internet Protocol] addresses from where they were first uploaded and how they were spread on social media.” It also conducted raids (<https://www.thenewsminute.com/karnataka/sit-raids-several-locations-in-hassan-to-trace-prajwal-revanna-video-leak>) in several locations in Hassan to trace the sources from where the videos were distributed. Additionally, the Karnataka State Commission for Women also urged the public to stop circulating the videos or else face legal consequences.

The option of having a helpline or similar platform where victims access support and protection, submission of evidence, and any other steps necessary in the immediate aftermath of an incident needs to be available to all victim-survivors, not only those of high profile cases. The UK, for example, has a dedicated helpline (<https://revengepornhelpline.org.uk/>) for all adult victim-survivors of IBSA while several countries (<https://stopncii.org/partners/global-network->

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of-partners/) have helplines and support centres for addressing online violence. There are some helplines (<https://revengepornhelpline.org.uk/how-can-we-help/if-we-can-t-help-who-can/help-for-victims-outside-the-uk/>) run by NGOs in India. However, data about the number of cases reported and how they were resolved is either unavailable or iffy. For example, Parihar runs the Vanitha Sahayavani (<https://bcpparihar.org/vanitha-sahayavani/>) helpline for women in collaboration with Bengaluru City Police. The number of reports of IBSA it may have handled and their resolutions are not clear from the statistics (<https://bcpparihar.org/reports/>) published on the website of Parihar.

Damming downstream distribution

Concerted interventions are necessary in all incidents of IBSA whether they are cases of individual victim-survivors or of a large scale (in terms of the number of videos, their reach, or the number of victim-survivors) such as in the Prajwal Revanna case. Some of them:

1. Mechanisms such as reporting abuse on individual posts are inadequate and not a time-efficient intervention when a large number of images or videos are involved. Some forums, pornographic websites, file-sharing services, and cloud-storage services are dedicated to hosting IBSA content. It is usually futile for the victim-survivors or those supporting them to try to contact such services and sites to remove the IBSA content.
2. Moreover, there is a possibility that, on being contacted, the services that host only IBSA content deliberately spotlight the content that victim-survivors are trying to get removed. They may also target the victim-survivors in other ways. For example, if the victim-survivor emails them with their real identity, they get identifying information such as their name and email address. If a fake name and a throwaway email account are used, it is possible to obtain information from the email header such as the victim-survivor's IP address (a unique identifying number assigned to every device connected to the internet) and their approximate location. Using all this information and their photos, it is possible to extract even more identifying information about the victim-survivors, such as their street address or social media accounts.
3. Reporting the content to StopNCII.org (<http://stopncii.org>) is one way of preventing its upload/ re-upload to services offered by its partner organisations (<https://stopncii.org/partners/industry-partners/>), viz, Facebook, TikTok, Reddit, Instagram, Bumble, Snap, Threads, OnlyFans, PornHub and Niantic.
4. Takedown requests for IBSA content can be directly made to these platforms via the remedial information (<https://oag.ca.gov/cyberexploitation#remove>) they have provided: Facebook (Meta), Google, Microsoft, Tumblr, X (formerly Twitter), Yahoo, 4Chan, About.me, Ask, AOL, Flickr, Lycos, MySpace and Snapchat. Other services that have removal mechanisms are Reddit (<https://perma.cc/7RQ6-LJZL>), PornHub (<https://www.vice.com/en/article/epgpqa/how-to-remove-videos-from-pornhub>), Imgur (<https://perma.cc/7RQ6-LJZL>), Photobucket (<https://perma.cc/7RQ6-LJZL>) and Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Guide_to_image_deletion).
5. Another possible intervention is to request search engines to de-

index the images and videos and the URLs where the videos are present. The de-indexed content will remain on the public internet but will not appear in search results. That reduces its discoverability and reach, and slows down its spread. Google Search, for example, offers this form to request removal of personal content (https://support.google.com/websearch/contact/content_removal_form?sjid=17893420848071338515-AP) under its content and product policies (<https://support.google.com/websearch/troubleshooter/3111061#ts=2889054,2889099>).

6. Victim-survivors also need technical support to prevent, mitigate or stop any online violence, harassment or abuse they may face after the incident. The incident may also make them vulnerable to what is called a 'digital attack'. The types of digital attacks that have been known to happen on IBSA victims include: stealing of their passwords, hacking of their email accounts, social media accounts or devices, usually to search for more material that can be abused, impersonating them on social media or elsewhere while trying to depict them as prostitutes, hacking their websites, and manipulating their photos or videos to show them as naked/ in a sexual act and posting those images on the internet.
7. In the case of images or videos that are stolen from compromised accounts or devices belonging to the victim-survivor or someone known to them, it is necessary to act to prevent the incident from repeating. An assessment by a digital security expert is necessary to determine the risks to victim-survivors and the exact support they need. The assessment and subsequent activities should follow the do-no-harm principle.
8. Government agencies can sensitise the public on this matter. South Korea, another country where IBSA is rampant and massive, displays warnings in public places against the non-consensual capture and distribution of intimate images.

In all interventions, it is absolutely necessary to put the voices, experiences and needs of all victim-survivors at the centre and to ensure their dignity, privacy and safety in the immediate and long-term.

** Rohini Lakshané is a technologist, interdisciplinary researcher and Wikimedian. <https://about.me/rohini> (<https://about.me/rohini>)*

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